Small School Parent Talks Football Recruiting

**Q? Describe the recruiting process that your son went through?** A. Parents and student-athletes have to understand that regardless of the sport involved, receiving recruiting interest from colleges can take as much effort behind the scenes than it does from the playing field, court, or other sports arenas. I’ll touch base in more depth on this subject in a later question. The process usually starts during the student-athlete’s junior year, sometimes as early as their freshman year, depending on the sport involved and at what level your son/daughter could be expected to play at. In our case, letters from the major in-state schools started coming in during the fall during his sophomore year, maybe one every month.

As the junior year progressed, it started out as a letter once every 2 weeks, and then by spring it was a letter a week. I’m not saying one letter total, I’m saying one letter per school, so some days we would receive anywhere from 2-6 letters per day 3-4 times a week. Let me say one thing about receiving letters, that’s all that they are, just because you are getting mail, doesn’t mean you are getting recruited! To say an athlete is being actively recruited means there should be personal contacts initiated by coaches in person or by phone. During the spring of my son’s junior year, we put together a highlight video that was sent out to schools during March, followed up by many phone calls to the coaches they were sent to. We did not send film unless they asked for it.

During the month of May is when an athlete will know what schools are really RECRUITING them. For football, the month of May is the first opportunity for colleges to make personal contact with student -athletes at school. If you don’t have any schools stopping by, you need to step up your efforts to get noticed. In our case, after the spring film was sent out, 4-5 schools, Division I through Division II level had stopped at the school. Now we had a better idea where things stood as far as what level to target with our recruiting efforts. During the spring my son was invited to 3 colleges’ Junior Days, a recruiting event held in the spring traditionally, and can be used somewhat as a measuring tool to know again what schools are really looking at you. During the summer we attended as many camps as possible, we also took a couple of unofficial visits, to continue meeting as many coaches as possible.

The fall came extremely quick, and went by even quicker, and during the fall, coaches would start calling when NCAA rules would permit. Depending on what kind of season you’re having, the schools that stopped by in the spring will continue to stay in touch and you might even pick up a couple of new schools. The end of the season brings the busiest time, as the mailings drop off, but the phone calls pick up. Some nights one coach called, others 3-4 coaches called. Most calls were to stay in touch, keeping us in the loop with respect to sending in senior film, and keeping us informed of good things to come from their respective programs. After sending out senior film, again, only to the schools that want it, it came down to the nuts and bolts of this whole “process”. Which schools would call and bring my son in for an official visit.

These are visits where the host college can within NCAA rules, pay for lodging and meals, and if necessary transportation. We were invited for 5 official visits, opting to go on 4 visits. Luckily, my son was able to get a scholarship offer at every visit. This doesn’t always occur, you won’t know if you are going to be offered a scholarship until the end of the visit, when the athlete and parent(s) meet with the head coach. After the dust settles on the official visits, then it is time to evaluate those visits and decide which school is the best OVERALL fit. This can be very stressful, as the schools under consideration will call often, and a decision has to be made within a few weeks. This is not a 4-5 year decision, but a 40-50 year decision! Once a decision was figured out completely, my son gave a verbal commitment to sign a National Letter of Intent with the University of Nebraska-Omaha, a highly respected Division II program.

**Q? Did you have any experience prior to this with recruiting?** A. Although I am not a teacher, I do have a Coaching Certificate to coach interscholastic sports. I coached basketball for a couple of years, and had a 6’9” center that received quite a bit of interest from mid major DI programs and DII schools. He signed with a Division II school. My older son was also looked at by smaller schools for basketball, but I learned from his experience, it takes a lot of hard work and effort to get noticed, unless you are in the top 10% of athletes in your respective sport.

**Q? What would you say was the hardest part of the recruiting process?** A. Three things come to mind. First, being told by a coach that your student-athlete is not being considered any longer as a prospect, especially when it is a school they really were hoping to get an offer from. The second was the deciding on which school to choose after receiving multiple offers. One day you could be leaning towards school A, the next day it would be school B. The third was telling the coaches you were not going to commit to their school, pretty much ending a relationship that had lasted for 6-12 months.

**Q? As a parent going through it, how stressful was it?** A. The entire process for the most part was fun, exciting, and enjoyable. I guess it is what you make of it. If you approach the recruiting process as a short term “hobby”, you are more likely to have a great experience. If you would look at recruiting as a nuisance, it probably will be negative. There really wasn’t much stress until probably mid January when you are right in the middle of the Official Visit time. The stress comes from hoping as a parent, you will be able to help your son make the best decision that will have a lasting positive impact on his life.

**Q? Was it harder to get recruited at a smaller school?** A. I would have to say being recruited at a smaller school would be more difficult by larger Division I colleges, because there has to be a greater degree of separation between the prospect and the rest of his peers on the field. For example, a running back better average about 10 yards/carry and run for 250+ yards a game in Class A. A running back can get attention for less yardage per carry and per game playing for a larger school due to the higher level of competition say Class 3A or 4A. Realistically, playing for a smaller school doesn’t mean you cannot be recruited, it is just you are looking more at Division I-AA at best and probably Division II. There is nothing wrong with being recruited at any scholarship level from Divison I thru Division II. Consider that about 1 in 130 high school football players get scholarship offers from major Division I schools, while about 75% of scholarship offers come from Division II and NAIA schools, and Junior Colleges.

**Q? Did colleges first recruit your son, or did you help to recruit your son to the colleges?** A. The major in state schools, started sending letters during his sophomore year, however, probably 1/3 of the players in the state get the same form letters. As I said before, receiving generic form letters with a preprinted signature means you are getting more junk mail…PERIOD! It doesn’t mean your son is being recruited. So through our efforts of making highlight tapes, making phone calls, going to combines, camps and taking unofficial visits, we were successful by pushing our way through the masses and recruiting our son to the colleges! You have to promote yourself to colleges. The average recruiting budget for a football coach is $500.00. They cannot possibly find every prospect possible, so you have to help them find you!

**Q? How did your family keep track of the recruiting process and what schools were in contact?** A. I put together a database of 28 colleges ranging from DII to major DI colleges within a 12 hour radius. Information such as coaches names, position coaches, addresses, and phone numbers. I kept this information on a laptop so I could update any contact information. I also was able to keep track of who had been sent film and who needed film. We kept mail if it was hand signed by a coach with whom we had a relationship with that had information about upcoming games or recruiting. If it wasn’t hand signed, after awhile we just threw those away…junk mail! After the initial junior film had been sent out and reviewed, we followed up with phone calls to find out which schools were genuinely interested. In the beginning, there was Iowa St., Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Kansas St., Nebraska, Northern Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, South Dakota St., Nebraska Omaha, Missouri Western St., Western Illinois, Northern Illinois, and a host of smaller DII schools. The key was to have as many options as possible, because we knew by fall this list would narrow down quite a bit, and were hoping 6-10 would still be in the mix.

**Q? Did your son go to many camps? How many did he get invited to?** A. He did not get invited to any camps. Most camps do not require any invitation, just an application accompanied by the required fees. I’ve estimated we spent or maybe I should say invested over $1000.00 during the summer. We did go to 8 schools during the summer, 5 were camps and 3 were unofficial visits. This is a very important thing to do! It gives you the opportunity to meet the coaches in person, while getting some excellent instruction at the same time! It gives coaches a chance to get a first hand look at your son to get a true idea of how they move, how fast or quick they are. Things that are harder to measure from just film, an in person evaluation can be a make or break situation. In my son’s case, UNO had coaches working at the Iowa State camp, and that is where they first had a chance to see him in person. Many Division II coaching staffs work at the large state school camps to look for prospects!

**Q? Your son decided to go the Division II route. Did he have thoughts of trying to play Division I football?** A. Of course most if not all kids want to play at the highest level possible, Division I. It appears glamorous to be on television and be in the spotlight. My son wanted to play at a Division I level, especially since he had early interest from Iowa St., Wyoming, and Nebraska. He entertained the idea of talking about walking on, however, as a parent, I tried to keep the focus on playing at the highest level possible, but on scholarship. In today’s age, if a student can graduate owing $10,000 or less after 4-5 years, they are way ahead of the curve. I know of a couple of kids that have walked on at major Division I programs and have worked their butt off, however, they still haven’t seen the field after 3 years of hard work. Plus they are getting a very minimal scholarship or none at all. My son figured he would have a better college experience going to a DII program in a very competitive conference and have a realistic chance of playing for a national championship and getting a chance to PLAY and pay little out of pocket.

**Q? How many highlight tapes did you send?** A. In the spring during my son’s junior year we sent out 28 tapes to schools. You need to call to make sure the right person gets them. Coaches look at hundreds of kids each year, you want to make sure your film gets looked at. By calling and following up, you greatly increase your chance of getting your film evaluated, which is what you want. The film will speak for itself, different coaches will see the same film differently.

**Q? How important were the highlight tapes during the recruiting process?** A. Having a highlight tape is probably THE most important thing a prospective recruit can do for themselves. It is good to have a highlight tape, usually 7-10 minutes in length, along with 2 COMPLETE game films for in depth evaluation. I look at the highlight tape as the cover letter and introduction, and the complete game tape as the resume. Most schools rely solely on junior/senior game film as the means for their evaluation process, and in determining who will get a scholarship and who will not.

**Q? Talk a little bit about official visits and what you did there as a parent?** A. As a parent, you want to talk to as many coaches, players, student ambassadors, and anyone else you can get information from. While your son is soaking everything in, they are obviously the focal point of the Official Visit, and a lot of information goes by and they don’t even realize it. My job as a parent was to be more of an interested observer, and really listen to anyone I could talk to and ask questions. It helped in discussing the various visits with my son and evaluating each one to help in determining if a particular school was the best overall fit.

**Q? Did any coaches lie to you during the recruiting process?** A. While some things told to us may have been overstated or embellished to sound the best at times, I believe the coaches we dealt with were very professional, straight forward, and honest.

**Q? If you had to do the recruiting process all over again, would you change anything?** A. I believe everything we did was the best way for us. We worked extremely hard, and were very diligent about everything we did. You have to be realistic about your expectations, because most kids will not play at a major Division I program on a scholarship. The sooner you can establish whether that is the case or not will allow you to focus your time, money, and energy into the most probable college programs that your son can have a chance to be successful at. If I would have done anything differently, I might have started the process on our end during my son’s sophomore year, instead of his junior year.

**Q? Do you have any advice for parents that will be reading this?** A. Yes. First of all be REALISTIC about the abilities of your son. In high school, a player can play linebacker at 5’10” 175 lbs. However, to play linebacker at that size at a scholarship level, is not a realistic expectation. College coaches really stress speed and explosiveness when evaluating players. They are less impressed with a 350 lb bench press than a kid who can run a 4.5 40 yard dash and has a 36” vertical jump. College coaches can help gain strength and help kids gain weight, but it is more difficult to coach speed and explosiveness.

Make sure you encourage your student athlete to take care of business in the classroom. Take the ACT test 3-4 times to try to get the highest scores possible. This can trigger discounted tuition rates or scholarships! Usually one of the first questions a coach would ask me after “what position does he play?”, is “what kind of grades does your son have?”

Strong academics and character are two extremely important factors coaches are looking for; it can make the difference whether they choose your son or someone else for the same scholarship!

If you can keep and open mind and not have any preconceived ideas about where you want your son to play, the chances of playing at a scholarship level will be better if you don’t limit yourself by favoritism, geography, or other personal preferences. We started out with 28 schools ranging from small DII to major DI schools. The highlight film and game film will not lie. Your son can only do what he can do. Recruiting is not an exact science by any means, but if you believe your son truly has the ability to play DII or higher, whatever his position, do yourself and your son a favor. Roll up your sleeves and get to work on making your son a known player to as many coaches and schools as possible. It can be a really educational experience and you can have a lot of fun along the way. If nothing else, this experience can help make your relationship with your son that much stronger. Good luck and happy hunting!